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SUBJECT: NEW VOICES IN THE LABOR VIOLENCE DEBATE

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SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Colombian research institutions are focused on labor violence to an unprecedented degree. Two prominent universities and six think-tanks have recently completed or initiated studies. The influx of new voices has intensified and enriched the debate concerning the causes and scope of violence against unionists. It has also unnerved self-styled Dean of Labor Relations Jose Luciano Sanin and his colleagues at the National Union School (ENS). In particular, a November 2009 econometric study by University of the Andes Economics Professor Daniel Mejia, which concluded that labor violence was "neither systematic nor targeted," has drawn criticism from labor groups and praise from the GOC. ENS attacked its assumptions and methodology and called the authors biased, while the GOC disseminated it widely in countries where it has pending free-trade agreements (FTA). The debate over the scope and nature of labor violence will widen and intensify this month when six think tanks participating in a labor violence study headed by the United Nations Development Program (UNPD) and funded by the diplomatic community present their initial findings to the GOC and civil society. End Summary.

"SERIOUS" ACADEMICS ENTER THE DEBATE

12. (SBU) Daniel Mejia, who earned his Ph.D. in Economics from Brown University, and co-author Maria Jose Uribe conducted an econometric study to test the claim (mainly by labor groups and NGOs) that "greater intensity of union activity (wage negotiations, strikes, protests, marches) leads to more violence against union members." Relying on both ENS and GOC data as well as a variety of estimation methods, time periods, data sources, and types of union activity, the authors found no statistical evidence supporting this claim. On the contrary, their results showed a strong correlation between violence against union members and areas with high levels of

general violence and low levels of economic development. The study also concluded that violence against union members had decreased at a faster rate than violence against the total population. GOC officials have embraced Mejia's study and disseminated it widely, particularly in countries where FTAs with Colombia are held up over concerns about labor violence.

13. (SBU) Although many hail Mejia's work as the first serious analysis of labor violence by a reputable Colombian academic institution, it is not without its detractors. Luciano Sanin, whose ENS figures are the traditional standard for labor violence discussions, argued that Mejia only took into account union activity that occurred within the context of collective bargaining processes, ignoring the numerous other protests, mobilizations, and political opposition movements that tended to attract violent reprisals. He said that statistically verifiable conclusions could not be drawn from partial information, especially when only one in five unionists in Colombia was actually party to a collective bargaining agreement. He also charged that Mejia had not been independent from GOC influence and suggested that the study was doctored to support passage of FTAs in the United States, Canada, and the European Union. Mejia and Uribe published a point-by-point response to Luciano Sanin's methodological critiques, and insisted on their independence. (Comment: Mejia is not known to be a GOC apologist. As recently as March 2009, GOC officials rebuked him for other work that was critical of supply-side drug interventions and Plan Colombia. End Comment.)

SIX OTHER RESEARCH CENTERS DUE TO WEIGH IN

14. (SBU) Six reputable, independent research institutions are currently conducting related studies under the auspices of the UNDP with financial support from the diplomatic community (reftel). The Conflict Analysis Resource Center (CERAC) is exploring methods of defining and measuring labor violence; the Center for Research and Popular Education (CINEP) is analyzing links between violence and worker protests; the New Rainbow Corporation (Nuevo Arco Iris) is studying labor violence in the context of the armed conflict; the Center for the Study of Law, Justice, and Society (DeJusticia) is studying impunity and justice system capacity; the Ideas for Peace Foundation (FIP) is analyzing the relationship between labor violence and Colombia's so-called "anti-union culture;" and the Center for Special Studies and Projects (CIPE) at the Externado University of Colombia is studying the efficacy of past and present protection measures for unionists.

15. (SBU) UNDP Democracy and Governance Specialist Jose Ricardo Puyana told us that the GOC and civil society groups, including Colombia's three largest labor confederations (CUT, CGT, and CTC), ENS, and the Colombian Commission of Jurists (CCJ), will review and offer their recommendations on the research centers' initial findings during formal "discussion groups" set to take place in late February and early March. The research centers will then refine their studies as necessary and prepare their final reports by May. Following a process of internal review and revision with oversight by Colombia's National University, the results will be combined into a final report and presented at an international seminar organized by UNDP in August. Observers note that the project, particularly the discussion group phase, is likely to generate an unprecedented degree of dialogue, debate, and controversy concerning the scope and causes of violence against unionists in Colombia.

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